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ABSTRACT

The New York State Regents Competency Tests in Writing and Comprehensive Examination in English reflect the belief that the current emphasis on test results mandates that testmakers produce tests that actually test what they purport to test, reflect what educators agree should be taught, and have a beneficial influence on teaching. Prior to the creation of this testing program, teachers in New York State had both reasons and excuses for not teaching writing, the most prominent ones being that teachers did not actually know how to teach composition and few had done much writing themselves. The testing program has led many teachers to learn more about the writing process, increase the amount of writing instruction, and realize that composition instruction should begin in kindergarten and continue throughout a student's school life. It has also affected the attitudes of many administrators, who now encourage more writing in their schools, give teachers more time for writing instruction, and arrange more inservice programs devoted to writing in all curriculum areas. The program has also produced several bad effects, such as the tendencies for some schools to narrow their writing programs to meet the testing requirements and to fragment the teaching of English by sending poor writers to "writing specialists." Overall, however, the testing program appears to have enhanced curriculum and instruction in writing in New York State. (FL)

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The New York State Testing Program in Writing: Its Influence on Instruction

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Whether we like to admit it or not, whether we approve or not, it is a fact of life that testing does drive instruction. If it is not state testing, it is the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Tests or IOWA Tests, or city-wide tests, or some commercially developed tests which may or may not have much relation to the local curriculum. Superintendents and school boards take a vital interest in tests, school scores are published in newspapers, and people judge the local schools by whether the pupils score above or below "the norm," usually without much understanding of what "the norm" is or how it is derived.

All of the emphasis on test results makes it imperative that test-makers produce good tests--tests that actually test what they purport to be testing, reflect what most educators agree should be taught, and have a beneficial influence on teaching. We in the New York State Education Department believe we have good tests in our Regents Competency Tests in Writing and in our Regents Comprehensive Examination in English. We believe that the writing section of the latter test and the former test in its entirety reflect, in so far as is possible in a testing situation, what we now know about the composing process. They require whole pieces of writing, suggest purpose and audience, and provide time for revision and editing. Criteria are provided for the scoring of the writing samples, criteria which include understanding of the task, organization, development, etc., as well as spelling and mechanics. Teachers are given inservice training in holistic scoring for evaluating the writing samples.

Prior to the New York State requirement of a competency test in writing, many teachers had both reasons and excuses for not teaching writing. One reason was that few teachers actually know how to teach writing and few teachers had done much writing themselves. Schools of education in the past have done

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little to prepare teachers to teach composition, although they have done a great deal to prepare them to teach reading. Most districts had no staff development to help teachers in this area. Furthermore, most teachers have neither the time nor the energy to keep up with professional literature.

Another reason for not teaching writing is that it is a lot of work. Teachers are only too human. It is much less difficult to teach literature (although not to teach it well), or have students do grammar exercises, than it is to work hard at teaching writing, especially if there is a lack of informed supervision and little reward for working hard.

Of course there are many excuses for not teaching writing as well. Familiar ones are, "I must teach grammar first" and "The elementary teachers didn't give them the basics." Probably the most interesting one is, "They can't write, so I don't assign compositions."

The fact of state testing tends to do away with both reasons and excuses for not teaching composition. The New York State tests are not magical, but they have had many positive effects--effects according to the teachers themselves. One major effect has been the interest in learning about the teaching of writing and district support of that interest. Districts have funded inservice programs and attendance at conferences dealing with the teaching of writing. Teachers are taking courses and getting involved with Bay Area type programs. We at the Bureau of English Education, mindful that we have a responsibility to help teachers as well as design tests, sponsor an annual two-day conference on the teaching of writing as well as lead countless workshops throughout the state on some aspect of the teaching of writing.

We find increasing knowledge about the composing process and more innovation in the teaching of writing, partially through the above and partially through the study of professional literature. Many administrators are also becoming more knowledgeable about the teaching of writing and there is less pressure to teach in the "good old ways" of sentence diagramming and ditto sheets, even though

there still are teachers and administrators who believe that grammar must be taught first. More people are actually teaching writing as opposed to assigning compositions.

The state tests have also resulted in an increased knowledge about evaluating composition. Partially as a result of the state requirement that competency tests have to be scored holistically and that different teachers have to evaluate each of the three writing samples on the test, teachers within a school have begun to talk to each other about standards and about expectations. This has resulted in further socialization on various methods of evaluation and requests for more inservice, including requests from people in disciplines other than English.

Another important improvement that is coming about, at least partially because a fifth grade writing test will be instituted in 1983, is the realization that composition begins in kindergarten or first grade and continues all one's life. Elementary and secondary teachers are beginning to talk with one another with a little more mutual respect. For example, at one district meeting of elementary and secondary teachers that I attended recently, I heard teachers say such things as, "I didn't know you did that at third grade!" "I didn't know you expected that at seventh grade!"

There have been noticeable effects of the competency testing program in writing on students as well as teachers. For one thing, in many districts less able pupils are receiving more attention; they are getting real help instead of being shoved aside and into classes taught by less inspired or less experienced teachers. In many cases, there is more motivation to do the writing tasks. In the ideal world, there would be no need to use testing as a stick for urging students to try to learn, but unfortunately, in the real world, it is a motivational force. Because the New York State Regents care enough about writing to make competency in writing a requirement for a high school diploma, students have more respect for the teaching of English and for the value of a diploma.

Administrators also are affected by the testing program. It seems that there are more enlightened ones than in the past, although there still are those who think they know all about teaching English because they speak the language--to some extent. One way enlightenment is displayed is in giving more support for the teaching of writing in giving more time for writing, in arranging inservice, in encouraging teachers to attend conferences. Another way is arranging for curriculum projects to develop writing programs and using these projects as inservice opportunities. Still another way is by encouraging writing across the curriculum, that is, recognizing writing as a way of thinking and learning in every subject.

Colleges and universities also have a part to play in the concept of writing competencies. The testing program was brought about, at least in part, because of the chorus of complaints about college students not being able to write. Their own remedial programs for college students have taught many college teachers something about teaching writing. Research has been spurred and teacher preparatory programs have been improved. Some college instructors moonlight as consultants and inservice directors for elementary and secondary personnel.

The program also has had a profound effect on us, the associates in the Bureau of English Education of the New York State Education Department. We have had to study research findings and translate those findings into publications and workshops to help teachers. We have had to do our own research to decide what kinds of pieces students are capable of writing at various stages of development and what kinds of tasks bring out the best writing of students. We have had to educate ourselves before we could help other people.

I don't want to pretend that the effects of the competency testing program are all good. They aren't. In places where a good writing program already existed, there may be pressure to narrow instruction to the tasks on

the test. In some schools, students are being taught a kind of formula to pass the test instead of being taught to write competently in a variety of situations. For example, in a New York City High School an "exemplary" lesson on a business letter was presented at a principals' meeting. The lesson included the following instructions.

> "Write the body of the letter by copying the question exactly, changing 'you' to 'I' or 'me.' Skip two lines and then copy the following ending: 'I am unhappy about the situation. Please contact me at 921-7575 concerning this problem."

Another bad effect is the tendency in some schools to send poor writers off to a "writing specialist." Some time ago, English teachers abdicated the responsibility for teaching reading to reading specialists, and for teaching speech to "speech specialists." If we fragment instruction even more by insisting that "writing specialists" teach composition, there will be very little left for English teachers.

The question is also often raised about those who "fall through the cracks." So far there have been few students who were denied diplomas solely because of the competency tests. Those who failed the tests also failed subjects and failed to earn enough credits to graduate. There are special provisions for handicapped children. However, it is also true that there are some students who are not classed as handicapped, who will never pass the competency tests, no matter how hard they try, and that is a sad disadvantage of the program.

What is the outlook for the future? In a state program, one can never be absolutely sure of anything. Funding stops or is reallocated. Priorities change. Changes in top administrative personnel or in the composition of the Board of Regnets can change policy. However, in the foreseeable future, there will be a fifth grade test in writing in New York State beginning in 1983, with all the attendant trauma for teachers and all the necessary inservice implied

by a state-wide test at the elementary level. It will probably also mean that there will be more whole-piece writing in elementary school, since the test will consist of one or more writing samples, not multiple choice or fill-in-the blank items. In the foreseeable future, also, the tasks on the 9th and 11th grade competency tests may change or alternate in order to encourage the teaching of all types of writing, not just the tasks that appear on the test.

Above all, it is important to realize that the New York State Regents tests in writing are designed as one way of encouraging the improvement of curriculum and instruction in writing, and, in the long run, improving the education of students in New York State. The indications are that they are beginning to accomplish that purpose.